

Hebrew Union College's Rescue of Scholars During the Holocaust



"The Jewish School in Exile" at Hebrew Union College (From left) Samuel Atlas, who had taught Talmud at the Institute of Jewish Studies at Warsaw; Abraham Joshua Heschel, formerly of the Juedisches Lehrhaus at Frankfurt-am-Main and the Institute of Jewish Studies at Warsaw; Michael Wilensky, who had worked with Chaim Nachman Bialik in the Dvir Publishing House in Germany before fleeing Nazi Germany for Lithuania where he lacked work and citizenship; Eugen Taeubler, Professor of History at Heidelberg until his dismissal by the Hitler government; Julius Lewy, formerly Professor of Semitic Languages and Ancient Oriental History at Giessen and Director of its Oriental Seminary, Curator of the Hilprecht Collection of Babylonian Antiquities at the University of Jena and editor of the publications of the Vorderasiatisch-Aegyptische Gesellschaft of Berlin; Julian Morgenstern, HUC President; Alexander Guttman, who had taught Talmud and Mishnah at the Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums at Berlin; Isaiah Sonne (hidden), who had taught at the Rabbinical College in Florence and later was Director of the Rabbinical College on the Island of Rhodes until Italy adopted the anti-Jewish laws of Germany; Eric Werner, formally Instructor in Jewish Music and Liturgy at the Theological Seminary of Breslau; Franz Landsberger, formerly Associate Professor of History of Art at Breslau; and Franz Rosenthal, a prize-winning Semiticist who had fled Germany.

Hitler's rise to power in the winter of 1933 was followed almost immediately by an initial implementation of his antisemitic ideology: on April 1st of that year Nazi storm troopers took up positions in front of Jewish businesses bearing placards that warned customers to keep away; Jews were assaulted in the streets and in some instances murdered. Students and faculty at the College could scarcely ignore what was happening to their brethren. They participated in the boycott of German goods; they discussed ways to stimulate American public opinion against Hitler, to advance the cause of German Jewry via diplomatic channels, and to secure relief for the refugees. Five years later, in November 1938, when German synagogues went up in smoke during the infamous *Kristallnacht*, HUC students sent a barrage of telegrams to President Roosevelt and urged their bi-weekly congregations to do likewise. Some of them helped to organize and publicize a giant protest meeting in Cincinnati's Emory Auditorium.

The College had a special relationship to German Jewry. The founders had all come from its ranks, and to a large extent the Board of Governors was still composed of men whose parents or grandparents had emigrated

from Germany. Various American-born members of the faculty, beginning with Morgenstern [HUC President, 1921-1947] had received their doctorates there and had made the intimate acquaintance of German Jews. But what, concretely, could the College, as an institution, do?

As it turned out, there was a saving, even unique, kind of action that HUC was able to perform. With the future of German Jewry becoming ever more hopeless,

Ismar Elbogen, the head of the *Hochschule* (now degraded by the Nazis to

Lehranstalt) für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, and Julian Morgenstern worked out an arrangement whereby a few students of the German liberal seminary could pursue their rabbinical studies at the College. If conditions

permitted, they would return to Germany after ordination; if not, they would seek positions in the United States. Despite the College's continuing financial difficulties and the ongoing lack of pulpit vacancies, its board agreed to underwrite fully the expenses of the five young men who arrived from Germany in the fall of 1935. In the next few years, three more rabbinical students from the Continent came to study in Cincinnati.

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From Michael A. Meyer, *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years*, HUC Press, 1976.

"HUC's rescue of European scholars is a deed which has a unique historical value and will remain memorable for all times. It is a noble rescue, not alone of the Jewish teacher, but also of Jewish teaching." Letter to HUC President Julian Morgenstern, April 23, 1939, from Michael Guttman, head of the Budapest seminary and father of Alexander Guttman

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The College might have done still more. Other applicants wanted to come and were turned down. But by 1938 the refugee students made up 12 percent of the total enrollment and there was a serious question of how many foreign-born, and generally quite traditional, young rabbis the American Reform movement could absorb. Morgenstern had to consider the situation in the United States; obviously he could not know what the consequences of refusal would ultimately be. Moreover, compared to other Jewish institutions, the College was doing better than its share....

Not only rabbinical students desired the opportunity to leave Germany for the sanctuary of the Hebrew Union College. Just as urgent were the needs of Jewish scholars in Europe who sought refuge from Nazi oppression and the chance to continue with their work under conditions of freedom. They, too, hoped for a haven at the Hebrew Union College. And the College – again far more than any other American-Jewish educational institution – recognized its responsibility here as well. Beginning in 1938, and despite major political obstacles, the College succeeded in bringing no less than eight Jewish scholars to the United States and in giving employment to three other refugee professors who had managed to make their way to America by other means. [Samuel Atlas, Alexander Guttman, Abraham Heschel, Franz Landsberger, Franz Rosenthal, Isaiah Sonne, and

Eugen Täubler were brought from Europe to Cincinnati on nonquota visas. Julius Lewy and Eric Werner were already in the United States when the College offered them positions; Guido Kisch (a historian of law) was already in the United States and became a visiting faculty member of the Rabbi Stephen S. Wise's Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. Max Wiener received his appointment while still in Germany but gained entry to the United States as a congregational rabbi. Ismar Elbogen was brought to America and maintained as a research professor in New York through a joint effort of HUC, JIR, JTS, and Dropsie College.] Most of them were not men the College needed for its program of instruction, and the expense of providing for them all was considerable. The majority of them spoke English only with difficulty. Yet Morgenstern felt the College had no choice but to pluck these brands from the fire. One of the men, Abraham Joshua Heschel, later said that in this regard the HUC President was "the least appreciated man in American Jewry."

Some of those who came to Cincinnati, scholars like Max Wiener and Franz Rosenthal, spent only a short time at the College. Others, such as Eugen Täubler (Bible and Hellenistic literature), Isaiah Sonne (medieval Jewish history), and Franz Landsberger (Jewish art), remained to devote themselves primarily to research. The rest eventually found their way into

the ranks of the regular teaching faculty. Of the last group, the one to achieve greatest prominence, Abraham Heschel, chose to leave the College after teaching for five years and attaining the rank of associate professor. During the time he was in Cincinnati, Heschel had drawn to himself a small but devoted group of disciples who appreciated his talents as a teacher of philosophy and a creative Jewish thinker. But his own traditionalism made him feel uncomfortable in the College's Reform atmosphere. In his letter of resignation, Heschel wrote that the College had become very dear to him and that he wanted to be considered "a staunch friend of this illustrious institution," but, he admitted, his own interpretation of Judaism was not in full accord with the teachings of the College. He therefore accepted a position at the Jewish Theological Seminary....

The simultaneous absorption of such a large number of immigrant scholars – at one point equivalent to the entire remainder of the faculty – was not an easy process....Most of the refugee scholars were not given regular faculty status until after a trial period, and some were not given it at all....But every refugee professor felt grateful to Morgenstern for giving him a place at the College. They knew that the alternative, for at least some of them, would have been almost certain death.

Meyer describes. "We wanted to give women a proper amount of attention and also to deal more extensively with the inner history of the Jews so that we could get away from the idea that all of German Jewish history had to be understood through the lens of the Holocaust."

This study begins with a long introductory essay dealing with the Middle Ages, as prologue. The bulk of the volumes cover the 17th century through the Holocaust, with an epilogue dealing with the German-Jewish diaspora and the new Jewish community in Germany after the war.

Meyer's expertise led Michael Blumenthal to invite him to serve as an advisor for the initial planning of the permanent exhibition for Berlin's Jewish Museum, housed in an extraordinary building designed by architect Daniel Libeskind. Meyer likens this cerebral building to a work by Kafka, which allows many interpretations, and praises the museum for communicating a lost history of German Jewry to a mostly non-Jewish, German audience. He faults the permanent exhibition, however, for its tendency to see assimilation as the major theme, and wishes that the Reform Movement and Rabbi Leo Baeck would have been given more attention – suggestions that he has forwarded to the curator in charge of revisions.

As someone who escaped Hitler, how does it feel for Meyer to return to Germany? "When I first began to go back to the land of my birth for scholarly conferences, I had a good deal of ambivalence about it. And for a time, it was my practice that whenever I was invited to a conference in Germany, on that

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